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SUBJECT: ROMANIA'S ROMA AT EUROPE'S DOOR

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BUCHAREST 00001235 001.2 OF 004

11. (SBU) Summary. Persistent poverty among Romania's ethnic Roma population, numbering at roughly two million by some estimates, remains one of Romania's most prominent social problems, which will impact other parts of Europe more directly after Romania enters the EU in 2007. Highly transient, groups of poor Romanian Roma have become a presence in many European capitals, a phenomenon that many Romanians believe has contributed to negative views of their country abroad. At home, Romania's Roma face the greatest hardship of any minority, with poor access to government services, few employment opportunities, high rates of school attrition, inadequate health care, and pervasive discrimination. Average Romanians typically blame the Roma themselves for their poor conditions, while the Government takes an often half-hearted approach towards trying to solve the problems confronting Roma. Human Rights NGOs characterize the persistent cyclical poverty confronting Romania's Roma as an issue that has "barely been addressed" since the fall of communism. Although some initiatives have shown some positive results, an emerging group of Roma activists view many programs implemented thus far as replacing Roma culture with a deepening culture of dependence. End Summary.

12. (U) Romania is home to Europe's largest population of ethnic Roma, commonly called gypsies. Although a 2005 official estimate put the Roma population at 730,000, reliable nongovernmental studies place the actual number at between 1.8 to 2.5 million, or 8 to 11 percent of Romania's total population. NGO analysts point out that government figures are inordinately low because many Roma will not reveal their ethnicity to census-takers or other authorities. In addition, many Roma lack official identity cards or other forms of identification that would allow them to be tracked. According to Roma NGOs, some local authorities also markedly underreport the number of Roma in their cities or counties in order to project a "cleaner image" for their communities.

13. (U) According to Roma scholars, Romania's Roma population is also extremely diverse and can be divided into over two hundred clans associated with specific vocations or crafts and over 1,000 family-based clans. These subunits range from highly traditional groups that earn middle and even high incomes from traditional vocations such as trading, metal processing, and recycling; to the Roma at the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder who live on the margins, often from refuse found in garbage dumps or begging. Many middle class Roma -- particularly in urban areas -- have fully integrated into broader society, sometimes at the sacrifice of their Roma identity. Uniting factors include informal use of dialects of the Romany language; strong family and clan traditions; the practice of traditional vocations; common physical traits and clothing choices; a concept of child rearing characterized as relaxed by outsiders; and a self-imposed separation from the rest of society

that is reinforced by widespread discrimination.

#### A Rich Community, But Not in Money...

14. (U) As PolOffs were drafting this cable, a number of Roma and human rights activists with whom we spoke emphasized that we should not focus only on the problems confronting Roma. They spoke of the rich history of Roma in the country, dating back 800 years or more. They noted the prominence of Roma artists and musicians. They described the resilience of Roma communities that survived slavery in Romania through much of the 19th century; the Holocaust, during which some 11,000 Romanian Roma perished; and the excesses of a communist regime that sought to wipe out ethnic differences. At the same time, many Roma activists have expressed frustration that conditions for many in the Roma community had not improved over the years, a situation that a small but growing number of activists blamed at least partially on Roma themselves for failing to seize the limited opportunities available to them or for resisting integration into broader society.

15. (SBU) Nonetheless, virtually all Roma activists and experts agree that the common problem confronting Roma is pervasive poverty. According to the Bucharest office of the Open Society Institute (OSI), ethnic Roma in Romania are five times as likely as the majority population to live below the poverty line. The OSI also estimates that approximately 60 percent of the Roma population live segregated from the majority population in communities with substandard housing without basic governmental services such as schools, adequate healthcare, running water, electricity, and waste disposal. Bucharest OSI Executive Director Renate Weber told PolChief that being Roma does not automatically mean being poor. However, she noted that virtually all social indicators are by far worse for Roma than for the broader Romanian population. This includes rates for infant mortality, illiteracy, malnutrition, alcoholism, criminality, and child abandonment. NGOs have also observed a much higher prevalence of HIV in Roma communities.

BUCHAREST 00001235 002.2 OF 004

#### Unemployment and the Cycle of Poverty

16. (SBU) Roma are also disproportionately unemployed or underemployed. According to a study by the progressive Bucharest-based Roma NGO Impreuna ("Together"), 67 percent of 1,511 Roma households surveyed have no employed member. Impreuna Director, Gelu Duminica told Poloff nearly all of these "unemployed" households relied on government entitlement programs often in the form of subsidies for children and infants. Duminica lamented that to some degree these entitlement programs have perpetuated a culture of dependence. However, without them, he said many Roma families could be pushed even further to the margins, with potentially dire results. He noted that many adults in these households continue to work on the gray economy, trading in markets or earning other unreported income. He believed that the government had "totally failed" thus far to develop sufficient incentives for marginalized Roma adults to enter the formal economy and to gradually reduce their reliance on public funding.

17. (SBU) One independent Roma activist asserted that a number of Roma had reacted to poverty in Romania not by seeking employment on the formal economy, but rather by illegally migrating to other parts of Europe where social entitlements are better or where it is easier to gain income on the gray economy or through other means such as begging.

#### Roma Women: Tradition and Hardship

19. (U) Traditionally, the Roma family structure is strong and patriarchal. Roma women also typically marry and begin producing children at an inordinately young age. According to a UNDP survey, 35 percent of Roma women marry before they reach 16 years of age. By the time they are 22 years old, 92 percent of Roma women are already married. Child marriage is common, and the pressure to

marry is strong. Although norms vary by group and socioeconomic standing, post knows of one case where an unmarried 16 year-old Roma girl has gone into hiding in order to avoid being kidnapped by members of her clan who want to force her into an arranged marriage.

In 2003, the self-proclaimed King of the Gypsies near the Transylvania city of Sibiu invited international guests to the wedding of his daughter whom they subsequently learned was only 12 years old. Local authorities immediately separated the child couple. The news of the wedding generated a new national debate over Roma child marriages, although the government took no new steps to try to end the phenomenon.

¶10. (U) The rate of domestic violence is also extremely high among Roma households. A 2004 study by Partnership for Equality Centre, a local non-governmental organization, determined that that approximately one in five Romanian women suffer violence from their husbands or partners. Although post found no reliable statistics specific to Roma, nearly all the NGO and Roma representatives with whom we spoke believed the rate in Roma households to be much higher, as a result prevailing attitudes in parts of the community that view domestic violence as "normal" and exacerbated among the high rate of alcoholism within the community.

¶11. (U) Romanian Roma culture also strongly discourages women from working outside of the home, especially in the formal economy. According to an OSI report in 2006, only 26% of Roma women interviewed were part of the workforce as employees, day-laborers, or free-lancers. Roma women were three times as likely to be unemployed as their male counterparts, who already have a high unemployment rate. The average monthly income of Roma women surveyed was 31 euros. Roma women often lack training, marketable skills, or relevant work experience. NGOs asserted that the GOR sometimes uses "a lack of data" as an excuse for the lack of policies and programs targeted at Roma women. These groups are calling for more data collection and analysis that provides a statistical breakdown by gender and ethnicity in order for the GOR to develop programs specifically for Roma women.

¶12. (U) The high birthrate within Roma communities poses additional challenges for Roma women. Producing children remains important in Roma culture, and many Roma women expect to have large families. At the same time, many lack access to family planning services or contraception (and to health services in general), or are unwilling to seek such assistance due to pressure from husbands or partners and norms within their community. Because of the high number of young dependents to take care of, in addition to the lack of skills and opportunities, many of these women never enter the job market.

#### Roma Children: Poverty Starts Early

¶13. (U) Few drivers in central Bucharest can stop at an intersection

BUCHAREST 00001235 003.2 OF 004

without being approached by a Roma child or young adult begging for pocket change. These children have become the most prominent face of Roma for urban Romanians, and in many ways encapsulate the broader social problems confronting Romania's Roma. Despite a popularly-held notion that Roma view their children "only as commodities," Roma NGOs report that many Roma parents lack a cultural appreciation for the value education for their children and erroneously view moderate child labor -- including begging -- as acceptable if not desirable as long as the child is not placed in extreme danger. That said, the social indicators for Roma children remain poor, and few Roma remain in school beyond the primary level.

¶14. (U) NGOs and the media report that pervasive discrimination by teachers and other students also serves as an additional disincentive for Roma children to complete their education. Post has heard numerous reports of Roma children being placed in the back of classrooms due to their ethnicity, of teachers ignoring Roma students, and of unimpeded bullying of Roma students by other children. In some communities, authorities have placed Roma in separate classrooms from other students and even in separate schools. The Romanian National Anti-Discrimination Council has

taken some steps to address these problems, although some activists describe measures thus far as largely ad hoc and in response to only isolated incidents.

¶15. (SBU) The high birthrate within Roma families coupled with a lack of employment, decent housing and basic services has also contributed to a much greater rate of child abandonment within the Roma community. One Roma activist confided to Poloff during a May 2006 OSCE Roma conference that this is an issue that has still not been sufficiently discussed, much less addressed, within the Roma community or by leading Roma NGOs. The activist opined that there remains a sense that the issue of Roma child abandonment is "yet another" sensitive topic where Roma "embarrass" broader society and thereby generate further hostility toward Roma.

#### Many Initiatives, Few Results

¶16. (SBU) Since the mid-1990's, the Romanian government has undertaken numerous initiatives with the professed goal of reducing or eliminating the social and economic differences between Roma and other Romanians. This was the period during which the government set up a special National Agency for Roma. Romanian NGOs report, however, that these initiatives have produced few results, as the situation for a large majority of Roma has remained virtually unchanged, due to corruption, inefficient use of funds, and culturally inappropriate programs that encourage continued dependence on state institutions or programs. Until recently, the National Agency for Roma remained severely under-funded, with staff who earned their positions primarily through political patronage rather than from expertise on the many problems confronting Roma.

¶17. (U) The prospect for increased funding brought by the EU accession process raised hopes in some Roma communities. However, some Roma NGOs have lamented that the GOR spent only 9 percent of EU PHARE funds in tackling unemployment for Roma minorities -- an insufficient amount given the scale of unemployment in Roma communities. Although the GOR has increased job programs designed for Roma people since 2001, many programs came short of expectations and were not sustainable once funding ended. Furthermore, one NGO underlined that many of programs' strategies "look good only on paper" but "none of the steps recommended would be completed." A community-based income-generating brick factory initiative in Dej, for example, is proving difficult to sustain beyond its project period. The factory will close soon if further external financing is not obtained to purchase the needed cement. As expected, grass-root NGO efforts have achieved better results in enterprise development and community-based income-generating programs.

#### What Works? Emerging Views for Roma Self-Sufficiency

¶19. (SBU) In the view of Gelu Duminica, and an emerging number of other young Roma activists, social inclusion, not employment programs, is the key to encouraging Roma to help themselves. Duminica opined that social exclusion can only be combated by "professional reinsertion programs" that focus on active measures supporting the Roma, not passive welfare measures. Duminica lamented that most social support programs in Romania, however, focused mainly on keeping the unemployed in "a constant state of dependency." Duminica also said that social support programs can be improved by developing measures which would "compel Roma to look for a job."

¶20. (SBU) Some Roma activists also view the increased participation of Roma in local and national administration as well as in political life as important. Nicolae Gheorghe, OSCE Senior Advisor on Romani

BUCHAREST 00001235 004.2 OF 004

Issues, remarked during the May OSCE Roma conference that 16 years ago, he thought the impetus for change would come from international organizations. Today, he believes that change has to be implemented by national governments. He remarked, for example, that the overall question of Roma land ownership needs to be resolved, as many Roma lack titles to their property. He said that neither individuals nor municipalities would be willing to invest in buildings or local

infrastructure without a clear understanding of land ownership in Roma communities. Roma Parliament member Nicolae Paun also noted that some 500,000 Romanian Roma still do not have national identification cards that would entitle them to state support. He applauded the efforts by the Romanian government for Roma and its "ID-card caravans" that travel to various Roma communities and issue identification on the spot to anyone lacking one. But he added that more -- much more -- must be done

¶21. (SBU) Comment: The pervasive and complex problems confronting Romania's Roma remain the subject of numerous conferences and countless academic and sociological studies, many which have been forwarded to post in thick envelopes. Nonetheless, as many Roma experts and activists have pointed out -- and as we have observed -- the situation for a large number of Romanian Roma has not improved since 1989, and has even worsened for some groups. The blame goes in many directions, including toward corrupt officials and a society that largely blames Roma themselves for their ills. No doubt discrimination toward Roma is pervasive, with attitudes that some Roma groups have compared to those of the American South in the 1950's and even Germany in the 1930's. As Romania prepares to enter the EU in 2007, the problems confronting Romania's Roma will increasingly become Europe's problem. Romanian Roma have already crossed borders into EU countries and more will arrive, particularly if the Romanian government and the EU fail to improve the conditions for this sizeable population which has remained at the margins for so long. End Comment.

Taubman